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ABSTRACT

The chief arguments against mandatory continuing education for professionals (MCE) are as follows: it violates adult learning principles, MCE is punitive to those who participate voluntarily; evidence that it results in improved practice is lacking; programs are not consistently and uniformly available; and professionals should be accountable for effective performance, not participation. Proponents support MCE for a number of reasons: expecting voluntary participation is unrealistic, evidence suggests well-designed programs can influence effective practice, MCE provides equal access to a range of opportunities, and mandates are necessary to protect the public. Some feel the focus should be on improving content and delivery and consider competency-based standards the solution. Such standards are controversial because a mechanical approach that breaks down professional performance into discrete tasks or skills ignores higher-level aspects. Another flaw is the assumption that performance is individual, disregarding its context. An alternative to debating the mandatory issue or appropriateness of competency standards is to improve continuing professional education. It should be accessible, affordable, and of high standards; relevant to individual learning needs, applicable to practice, and designed for different learning styles; viewed as part of the lifelong learning continuum; link practitioner competence to the ideals of public service and accountability; and consider the professional as an adult learner. Contains 9 references. (YLB)

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NO. 151

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Mandatory Continuing Education

by Sandra Kerka

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The issue of mandatory continuing education (MCE) for professionals is controversial because at its heart are questions about the nature of professions and of adult education. Being a professional implies commitment to continuing one's education and the ability to pursue practice-enhancing learning. So there would seem to be no need for mandates. However, due to advances in knowledge and technology, as well as public demands for accountability and consumer protection, the number of states requiring continuing education for many professions has significantly increased in the last 10 years (Queeney and English 1994). This *Digest* reviews arguments on both sides of the debate and relates MCE to the national standards and competency movements. It describes how continuing professional education (CPE) program developers can provide effective learning for professionals in a mandated environment.

The Great Divide: MCE Pros and Cons

The following are the chief arguments of those opposed to MCE (Brockett and LeGrand 1992; Morrison 1992; Nelson 1988; Queeney and English 1994):

- It violates adult learning principles, such as voluntary participation, the informal nature of adult education, and adult self-direction. It promotes uniformity by disregarding individual learning needs and styles.
- By definition, professionals are supposed to be autonomous, self-managed, and responsible for mastery of knowledge; MCE is punitive to those who participate voluntarily.
- Evidence that it results in improved practice is lacking. All that is mandated is attendance, which will not necessarily change attitudes, motivation, determination to practice responsibly, or ability to learn.
- Programs are not consistently and uniformly available. Many lack quality and relevance to practitioner needs. MCE may encourage providers to focus on profit.
- Requiring participation may hinder learning by reducing motivation and individual responsibility.
- Professionals should be accountable for effective performance, not participation.

Proponents support MCE for the following reasons (Brockett and LeGrand 1992; Little 1993; Nelson 1988; Queeney and English 1994; Queeney, Smutz, and Shuman 1990):

- Expecting voluntary participation is unrealistic. Those who need it most may be least likely to participate.
- There is some evidence that well-designed programs can influence effective practice.
- MCE can provide equal access to a range of opportunities.
- Mandates are necessary to protect the public from incompetent or out-of-date practitioners.
- Although imperfect, it is better than such alternatives as examination or practice review.
- By choosing a profession, professionals submit to its norms. A license to practice implies consent to be governed by the rules of the profession.

Although some studies have found negative attitudes among those required to participate, Queeney, Smutz, and Shuman (1990) suggest that MCE participants may judge their participation more thoughtfully and critically **because** it is required; they expect high quality and applicability and become more astute consumers of learning opportunities.

Some feel that the mandatory debate is a dead issue (Brockett and LeGrand 1992; Nelson 1988; Queeney and English 1994). Rather than arguing about whether professional continuing education should be mandatory, the focus should be on improving the content and delivery of CPE. However, the "content of CPE courses is often based on precedent or what the providers think is worthwhile, rather than any systematic analysis of what constitutes competent current practice of the profession" (Hager and Gonczi 1991, p. 24). Some consider competency-based standards the solution.

Competence, Standards, and MCE

Competency-based standards movements are well under way in vocational education and some professions in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Competency-based certification and licensure are also a growing part of MCE (Queeney and English 1994). However, educational providers, legislators, and professional associations disagree about what competence means and what is the nature of expertise. A competent professional has the attributes—knowledge, skills, abilities (KSAs)—necessary for performing a job to appropriate standards (Hager and Gonczi 1991). Competence includes such aptitudes as interpersonal skills, motivation, and professional judgment (Cervero et al. 1990); it also involves values, beliefs, and attitudes (Nelson 1988). To Davison (1994), competence is what a person is able to do, but the larger issue is what he or she is **willing** to do; that is, will they use acquired KSAs in the practice setting? The role of CPE is to bridge the gap between professionals' knowing how to and knowing to (Davison 1994; Nelson 1988).

Competency-based standards for professionals are nearly as controversial as MCE, because a mechanical approach that tries to break down professional performance into discrete tasks or skills ignores such higher-level aspects as critical reflection and professional judgment. Hager and Gonczi (1991) propose an integrated approach that identifies the KSAs displayed in the context of realistic professional tasks. The resulting standards would enable professionals to assess their own levels of competence and choose continuing education accordingly.

Another flaw in the competence approach is the assumption that performance is individual. Cervero et al. (1990) identify other

influences upon performance: the relationship of the professional with peers, subordinates, superiors, and clients; the multiple cultures to which individual practitioners belong; and the relationship of the professional to society (the cultural context of practice). Thus, although continuing education (mandatory or not) may be a factor in improving competence, it is difficult to separate the effects of participation from those of other influences on practice (Queeney and English 1994).

Improving CPE

Rather than debating the mandatory issue or arguing whether competency standards are appropriate for professionals, "a preferable alternative might be to focus on alleviating the problems associated with continuing professional education as a tool for improving professional practice" (Queeney and English 1994, p. 16). Some of the problems are as follows (Cervero et al. 1990): multiplicity of providers; lack of standards; and dissention about who should pay, who should determine the level and frequency of participation, and what type of activity should count as continuing education.

Effective CPE should be **accessible, affordable, and of high standards**. It is difficult to balance quality considerations with the need to keep costs reasonable, serve large numbers, and address continual updating needs in many specializations. Collaboration among providers is recommended. CPE should be **relevant to individual learning needs, applicable to practice, and designed for different learning styles**. Professionals in organizational settings should receive support for transferring learning to practice, and interstate mobility of MCE credentials should be established.

CPE should be rooted in and viewed as an extension of professional education. Competence evolves over time, and effective learning is a long-term, cumulative, integrated process (Cervero et al. 1990; Queeney and English 1994). CPE should be viewed as **part of the lifelong learning continuum**, and development of a **mindset** toward continuing education should begin prior to practice. This requires a **systematic approach to developing a strategic lifelong learning agenda** that is holistic (taking into account the multiple cultural influences on practice). Currently rare, educational counseling services for professionals are needed.

CPE should **link practitioner competence to the ideals of public service and accountability** by (1) stressing the value judgments and ethical considerations in practice, (2) developing competence and expertise in conjunction with understanding of the human purposes of professional service, and (3) promoting cooperation, interdependence, and collaboration as additional ways to improve competence (Cervero et al. 1990).

Nelson (1988) warns that MCE should not be oversold as a solution. Associations for professions in which continuing education is mandatory should promote the values of CPE to their members while acknowledging to the public the limitations and difficulties of certifying competence and of documenting MCE's effects on practice.

A most important factor in overcoming objections to mandated education is consideration of **the professional as an adult learner.** Program design and delivery should emphasize consultation and cooperation, not coercion (Nelson 1988). Professionals can be given broad latitude in the selection and design of their individual learning programs (Brockett and LeGrand 1992), especially if standards against which to compare them have been established. Cervero et al. (1990) give the following description of professionals as learners: "professionals construct an understanding of current situations of practice using a repertoire of practical knowledge acquired primarily through experience in prior 'real life' situations" (p. 178). CPE must foster both **practical knowledge or know-how** as well as **critical reflection**.

Although in some professions MCE has become the norm, its mandatory nature should not be the focus. "One answer to the mandatory continuing education conundrum may be not the mandatory or voluntary nature of continuing education, but the transformation of professionals into motivated seekers of education" (Queeney and English 1994, p. 4).

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